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Issue and Debate

MX Missile Could Mark Big Switch in U.S. Nuclear Policy

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WASHINGTON, June 15 — President Carter's decision last week to begin full-scale development of the MX mobile intercontinental missile culminates a long-running debate over American strategic policy.

At issue is whether the United States, in the face of increasing Soviet missile power, needs the capacity to threaten limited nuclear strikes against military targets in the Soviet Union to maintain mutual deterrence in the 1980's.

The Carter Administration views the new strategic arms treaty, which will be signed on Monday at the summit meeting in Vienna, as a key step in slowing the growth of Moscow's missile arsenal. At the same time, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and other senior national-security aides stress that the accord will not solve all the military problems that could confront the United States during the coming decade.

In particular, there is widespread concern that, with or without the arms treaty, Moscow will achieve the ability, in theory, to knock out almost all of the Air Force's 1,054 land-based missiles in a surprise first strike.

Exact Locations Concealed

The MX, which will be shuttled back and forth among different launching sites in the Southwest, is designed to frustrate any Soviet first-strike intentions by concealing the exact location of each missile from Soviet intelligence. Equipped with 10 separate nuclear warheads, the MX would also enable the United States, for the first time, to carry out pinpoint attacks on Russian military targets, including 1,500 rockets in underground silos.

In the past, American leaders, including Mr. Carter, were opposed to the idea of threatening Soviet military targets with limited nuclear strikes, maintaining that the threat of full-scale retaliation against cities and industries

was sufficient to deter any attack by Moscow. But in projecting the development of the MX and other new weapons, like the low-flying cruise missile, the Administration has evidently decided that the way to respond to Moscow's first-strike potential against American military targets is to give the United States a similar capability.

Such a course of action would constitute a significant shift in American nuclear policy and Mr. Carter's MX decision has thus generated a growing controversy on Capitol Hill and among defense analysts in and out of government. Both critics and supporters of the concept of providing the United States with a capacity to wage a limited nuclear war say that the outcome of this debate could be as important to American security as the result of the Senate vote on the strategic-arms accord.

Background

The basic American policy for deterring a nuclear war with Moscow was laid down in the mid-1960's, when Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, formulated the so-called "mutual assured destruction" strategy. This said that the cheapest and safest way to avoid a major conflict was for both sides to threaten full-scale nuclear retaliation if either threatened a first-strike attack. Mr. McNamara and his successors said that in the event of a war with Moscow, the primary objective would be to deliver overwhelming blows against Soviet cities and industry.

It was not clear at the time whether the Soviet Union agreed with Mr. McNamara's views on deterrence. But during the 1960's officials stressed that Moscow's small and relatively unsophisticated nuclear arsenal made a first strike against American missiles highly unlikely. When Moscow, in 1968, agreed to begin the strategic-arms talks, some officials hoped that future

Soviet-American agreements would limit the ability of either side to threaten the other's retaliatory capabilities.

In recent years, however, the strategy of "mutual assured destruction" has come under increasing criticism. Although Moscow has entered into arms agreements, it has also considerably expanded its strategic arsenal, deploying over 1,000 new missiles in the last decade. Many of these missiles, such as the 10-warhead SS-18, are accurate enough to threaten American land-based missiles.

More important, perhaps, many officials have revised their estimates of Soviet nuclear intentions. In 1976, "Team B," a group of conservative officials and academics who had been given Central Intelligence Agency data on the Soviet strategic buildup, created a stir when they argued that Moscow desired strategic superiority by seeking a first-strike capability against American missiles. In a speech this month at Annapolis, Md., Secretary of Defense Brown seemed to embrace this conclusion when he asserted that Moscow had long sought to threaten American land-based missiles and that it would probably be able to achieve this capability by as early as 1981.

The Case for a Shift In Nuclear Policy

The most straightforward argument used to justify the acquisition of new weapons able to threaten missile silos and other military targets in the Soviet Union is that they are necessary to maintain military balance in the future. In his Annapolis speech, for example, Mr. Brown said the Administration's primary strategic goal was "essential equivalence" with Moscow in nuclear forces and that it would thus be unacceptable if only the Soviet Union possessed a first-strike potential.

Other officials, including George M. Seignious, the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, also contend that efforts to match Moscow's first-strike potential could enhance future arms-control opportunities. Mr. Seignious asserts that if the United States did not move ahead on weapons like the MX, Moscow would have little incentive for considering American proposals for cutting the missile arsenals of both sides in the